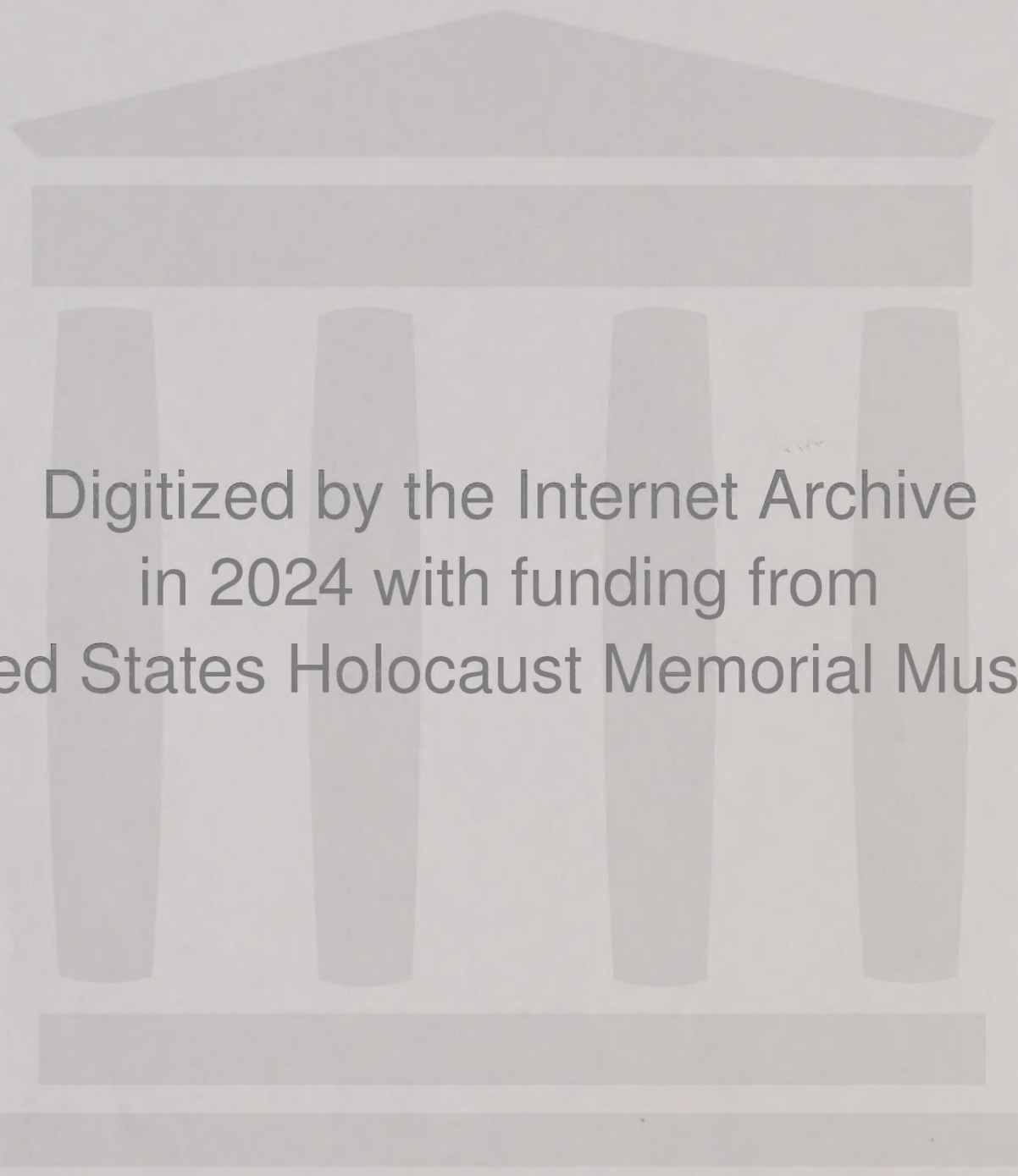




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ALFRED LANGER

A MEMOIR

My name is Alfred Langer. I was born in Bielsko-Biala, Upper Silesia in Poland on April 1, 1934. My family owned a textile factory in town so we were fairly well off. We lived in the same apartment building as my grandparents and an assortment of aunts and uncles. It was a blissful existence. I had an older sister, Kitty- now deceased- who also survived the Holocaust.

On September 1, 1939 things changed drastically. The Germans invaded Poland and it wasn't long after the occupation that the persecution of the Jews began. The Russians had occupied Bielsko before the German invasion and before their retreat from the Germans they rounded up people at random and took them to Siberia. Sala Rabinowitz, my maternal grandmother was among those deported. I was only 5 years and 5 months of age at the time, yet I vaguely remember how distraught the whole family was over my grandmother's deportation. Little did we know that being deported to Siberia probably saved her life. She survived the war and died a natural death in 1961.

We were on the run for a while, trying to keep a step ahead of the advancing Germans. Somehow my parents contacted a Christian family who agreed to keep me as their own, for a price. They procured false documents for me and sometime in 1940 I ceased to be Alfred Langer and became Stefan Lorek. Although at the back of my mind I knew my true identity, a team of wild horses couldn't have dragged it out of me. . Stefan Lorek was a good Catholic boy who dutifully went to church every Sunday. I knew my catechism by heart and was so well behaved in church that people became suspicious; no 6-year old behaved that well. Jewish boys had more trouble passing themselves off as Gentiles than girls did because in Poland at the time only Jews were circumcised. So I knew enough to never undress in front of other boys. The family who kept me throughout the war consisted of an old woman whom I called 'babka' - Polish for grandmother-, her daughter and her son-in-law. They were Ukrainian peasants and had no love for the Jews. Fortunately they- especially 'babka'- grew fond of me, otherwise I wouldn't be here to tell this story. They treated me well for the most part and took a considerable risk considering the dire punishment meted out to those who were caught harboring Jews. Furthermore, there was a reward for turning them in. After the war I had many an argument with some of my

surviving relatives who claimed that the only reason they saved me was because they were well paid by my parents, whereas I argued that once my parents were out of the picture there was nothing that could have kept them from turning me in and collecting a reward. So for the next five years I remained Stefan Lorek. Then in April of 1945 I received the shock of my life. The Russian army had just liberated our sector of Poland and sometime in April- I don't recall the exact date- we were visited by a Russian soldier who said that he wanted a word with me. What happened next will be forever etched in my memory. He said: "Your name is Alfred Langer and you are a Jew!" I started crying and told him that my name was Stefan Lorek and I was not a Jew. I had just turned 11 years of age and to say that I was frightened is an understatement. 'Babka' didn't want to let me go and I didn't want to leave. But our protestations were to no avail and I was taken away. I never found out how the soldier- who was Jewish- was able to find me. My best guess is that my grandmother who was deported to Siberia when the Russians retreated from Poland somehow knew of my whereabouts. Or it could have been Kitty, my older sister who also survived might have been looking for me and somehow got word of where I was staying. But this is pure conjecture and the truth may never be known. Kitty didn't want to talk about her experiences during the war; I suspect that my travails paled compared to hers....

I wound up in a DP camp where I was reunited with my sister. We only had the clothes on our backs and had to apply for winter clothes from the Red Cross and the United Jewish Appeal. We were malnourished, confused and traumatized. Everybody wanted to find out what happened to their loved ones and some were eventually reunited with what was left of their families. In our case, my sister and I were the only ones in our immediate family who survived.

After several weeks in the DP camp arrangements were made to take about a hundred of us- all children- to England and we embarked on a Swedish vessel. I don't remember much about that voyage except that almost all of us got seasick on the stormy Baltic Sea. Most of the children had no relatives to greet them upon arrival in London; our uncle Ernest Rabinowitz who served in the British army during the war and was living in London at the time greeted Kitty and me. I was promptly enrolled in a Jewish orthodox school and to say that this was a culture shock is an understatement. I didn't know a word of English and the Jewish religion was completely foreign to me. Fortunately I discovered that I had an affinity for languages and it didn't take me long to learn English. I believe it was understood from the very beginning that England was just a temporary haven. As it happened, another uncle- this one on my father's side- had managed to immigrate to South America just before the war. My uncle Hugo Langer was living in La Paz, Bolivia and he arranged for uncle Ernest, Kitty and me to join him there. So, after a sojourn in

London of approximately one year, we boarded the s/s "Campana", an Italian steamship and headed for South America. The trip was not too pleasant, we were in steerage and seasick most of the time. I don't remember much about the trip; one thing that stands out is that when I got sick and required medical attention, it was not forthcoming on account of my nationality. It seems that there were doctors to treat Italians, British or French but none for Poles! Uncle Ernest who was a British citizen had to use his influence to get me medical help. We docked in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and from there flew to our destination, La Paz, Bolivia. It was autumn of 1946. Uncle Hugo and aunt Lotte greeted us warmly; it was a big adjustment for all concerned.

I was 12 years of age at the time and because of my age I was enrolled in the twelfth grade at the American Institute in La Paz. It was a private school run by Methodists and despite what the name may have implied, all instruction was in Spanish. Of course I didn't know a word of Spanish so I had to learn my second new language in two years and I had to do it in a hurry. As luck would have it, there was a girl in my class who was fluent in English; I must have been the only student in school history who had his own interpreter! I attended school for four years and two years later, in 1952, I decided to make "aliyah" and immigrate to Israel to live on a kibbutz. I joined a group of young people who had the same idea and we spent about a year on a farm near Montevideo, Uruguay to learn about farm life. I arrived in Israel in the fall of 1953 and stayed in a kibbutz for a little over a year. Of course I had to learn Hebrew, another new language. This was more difficult because one has to master the Hebrew alphabet. It didn't take me long to learn to speak Hebrew but after a year was still illiterate until I was sent to an "ulpan" in Jerusalem. That's a school where newcomers were sent for the sole purpose to learn to read and write in Hebrew. I soon realized that kibbutz life was not for me, so I enlisted in the Army. Military service is compulsory in Israel so I'd eventually have had to serve anyway; I just joined before my number came up.

Upon my discharge from the Army, I did odd jobs and went to waiters' school and joined the merchant marine as a steward. It was interesting and I got to see much of Europe and the Americas. It was on one of those trips, while we were docked in Bremen, Germany that I had one of many flashbacks. I had just awakened that morning and I looked out the porthole and could hardly believe my eyes: right there in front of me, fluttering in the wind was a swastika! I was seized by terror and felt like I was in a time warp. It had been over 10 years since I had seen that symbol of evil. It was later explained to me that it happened to be the flag of an Icelandic or Finnish shipping company. Apparently the Nazis lacked the originality to come up with their own emblem.....

Meanwhile, my sister had married an American citizen and settled in the United States. We kept in constant touch and she urged me to join

her in the U.S., which I eventually did after the required waiting period. I boarded the s/s Zion in Haifa on May 31, 1962 and arrived in New York two weeks later. Three days later I took a Greyhound bus bound for Oklahoma where Kitty and her family resided. It was a happy reunion and I have lived in Oklahoma- mostly Tulsa- ever since.

I am retired now, have been married and widowed; I have had my share of happiness and grief. Yet in all those years I was not able to exorcise those early memories. I am still haunted by the memory of the fate that befell my parents and many other relatives during the war. For years I had intermittent dreams where my parents were alive and trying to communicate with me. For many years I tried to block the past from my mind, afraid that people might think that I was using it as an excuse for any shortcomings I might have. There was also the irrational guilt that many of us felt for having survived while so many others did not. Another reason why I decided to speak out is the proliferation of revisionist historians who claim that the Holocaust never happened. About five years ago I gave my testimony to the Shoah Visual History Foundation. It was not an easy thing to do, dredging out those long forgotten memories. I believe, however, that it is our duty as survivors to educate others about the consequences of hatred, prejudice and intolerance run rampant and unchecked. The Holocaust was not the first case of genocide nor was it the last. But never before or since has one been carried out so ruthlessly, systematically and methodically. To forget, or worse yet, to ignore what happened would be folly. History ignored is bound to repeat itself. Yet I can understand those whose experiences were so horrible that they cannot bring themselves to relive them.

On a personal note, I have only one regret: I never tried to contact the family who kept me during the war and basically saved my life. My only excuse is my youth at the time and my own state of confusion. It would have been a monumental task and the chance of success would have been slim. But I wish I had at least tried.

